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Utah kids fit and fed — sort of

Deseret Morning News editorial

A local wag once cracked that Norman Bangerter was the perfect name for a Utah governor, since the state seemed determined to always adhere to "the norm."

Whether that holds true or not, it is certainly true in recent reports about childhood nutrition and fitness. Despite the hand-wringing in the state over the obesity and lack of exercise among Utah children, according to statistics released by Child magazine Utah ranks 21st among 50 states. That's not good. There are plenty of things left to battle. But it's much better than the dread that has hounded educators, parents and health officials about the health of Utah's youths.

Several East Coast states were high on the "fed and fit" list. Several from the West were on the low end, including Wyoming (42), Idaho (43) and Nevada (48). One reason Utah did better is the state requires students to take physical education courses. Also, a majority of Utah mothers still breast-feed their infants six months after giving birth — the best ratio in the nation.

On the downside, many of Utah's playgrounds are considered dilapidated, and too much candy and junk food is still being offered to students through vending machines. Child magazine also suggests that physical education classes be taught by teachers trained in that area and not be staffed by other teachers filling in a class schedule.

The Deseret Morning News has advocated doing more to put nutritious food in vending machines in schools. And safe playgrounds are a natural priority. But it is some comforting to realize all other states grapple with similar concerns. Lack of exercise, in fact, is a national epidemic, not just a phenomenon among school-age children.

We urge runners to run, walkers to walk, golfers to golf and tennis players to serve and return. Even a little physical activity can go a long way to pull both kids and adults back from the brink of collapse. We also encourage parents to make sure the foods their children eat include — at least at times — a full dose of daily requirements of vitamins and minerals.

Being 21st in anything is not something to crow about. But the ranking is definitely something to build on. With a concerted effort and a commitment to the building blocks of fitness and nutrition now in place, Utah can easily climb higher on the list.

For a state that prides itself on its kids and its family atmosphere, nothing less will do.

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